



## IN THE INTERPRETER'S HOUSE

*"So they drew on towards the house (the house of the Interpreter) and when they came to the door they heard a great talk in the house."—Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.*

### A TALK ABOUT LINCOLN



DON'T know why I feel the way I do about the name of Lincoln. I have no such sentiment about Washington. I am profoundly respectful to the memory of that great and good man,

#### The Name of Lincoln

but I have no sense of outraged propriety when I see inebriate homes, soap and a pudding called after him. When a man says he believes in the "eternal principles of Washington," I don't mind it at all. It proves nothing about the man except that he doesn't know what he is talking about. Bad principles are apt to be as nearly eternal as good principles. Our Christian doctrine teaches us this. There are two sides even to eternal life. The damned live as long as the blest. Washington's soldier-slave-owner-gentleman theories of government flourish in spots more vigorously than the example of his great love of country, his unselfish devotion to the cause and the marvel of his well-ordered and divinely balanced life. But when a man declares his "unalterable devotion to the principles of Lincoln," I want to kick him. What right has any man to copyright this name for his own selfish purposes? It is as if he used my mother's name to advertise a patent medicine. It is taking a name in vain that holds in solution all brotherly love, tenderness, good-will, patience and sorrow. A Republican party of tariff and trusts, sub-

sidies and corporation jobs calling itself the party of Lincoln! A mob of angry, cruel, vituperative, oppressive Democrats calling itself the party of Lincoln! Impious!

I don't know why I feel so about Lincoln. I have read many accounts of his life, from

#### Every Scrap

#### About Him

#### Precious

Herndon's gossip to the books of Miss Tarbell and Mr. Hapgood. Once even I trudged through the dismal reaches of Nicolay and Hay—an incomparable work, thank heaven. They found a garden and made it a wilderness. Yes, I almost alone, I and the proofreaders and Mayo Hazeltine have toiled through this masterpiece. Out of great love for Lincoln, I did it and loved him none the less for it. Every scrap of printed paper bearing his name, I read. To arrest my eye you have but to print the name of Lincoln. New stories, old stories about him, estimates, essays, poems, recollections, dreams have held me. Anyone who knows Lincoln, or pretended to know him, could and can and will find me a breathless listener. Even if I know him to be a liar, I will hear him, for it is about Lincoln he lies. At least he chooses a worthy subject for his tale. He is a liar of discrimination.

I SPENT a good part of the only well-spent part of my life, a listening boy, in a part of the country where men knew Lincoln—or thought they did—as well as they knew the backs of their own hands. They were full of tales about him

—the kind of tales that reflected a natural human desire to bring him down to their own level. By their account and the examples they offered of his method of entertaining his friends he was Rabelais without the wit. Their meretricious old memories recalled sayings and stories of Lincoln that were as ancient as

Lucian and had been sifted through generations of unappreciative intelligences until only the wickedness remained. Every favorite vulgarity of the hired man was attributed to him. Apparently of the seven good stories in the world he knew only the six "that were unfit for ladies to hear." This picture of him was especially prevalent among gossips and loiterers in Southern Illinois and Indiana where the rancor of sympathizers with the South could be safely assiduous in spreading reports damaging to his reputation. On the whole, I gathered that he was not different from the men around him. It was a period when reserve was not fashionable in this part of the world. Men called each other by names that are now seldom used even in the diminishing Far West. The politeness of "smiling when you say that" was the only thing demanded of them. It was a period of Elizabethan broadness of speech. Lincoln's friends could have talked on good and equal terms with Raleigh. And I can well believe that most of the stories of his stories are lies. Human nature properly rebels against the heroic and seeks to find the error in the shining armor of the great. The worst they can do to the memory of Lincoln is to pile upon it the sins of his generation against cleanness of speech and their fifty times diluted gossip is matched by the testimony of those who knew him best at a time when accurate record of his speech was important—aye, overwhelmed by his choice of hymns and friends, by the austerity of his life and by the incomparable piety of his public utterances.

YOU ask what I am trying to prove? I am trying to show you that I know all there is to be said against Lincoln. In the part of the country that I entered too late, alas! to see that sad face, there still survived many men who had known him well and some who hated him well. The

Copperhead is a much abused political memory. Yet he was not without some of

### The Much

### Abused

### Copperhead

the qualities heroic. Nourished by Douglas in a fantastic, legal view of a question that by all the portents must some day be decided without regard to law, or judges or constitu-

tions, he continued with stupid bravery to make his unequal fight for the "constitutional right of the South to secede" after the Constitution had been put on the shelf that the cartridge boxes had been taken from. His history deserves to be written, for he was the everlasting symbol of stupid egotism, the crownless martyr for a wrong; the man who went to the stake for a disbelief.

For four years these infatuated men suffered tortures. They were harassed in countless ways, ostracized, insulted, mobbed. Their houses were burned. Children hooted at them in the streets. Women drew their skirts away from them. If they were lawyers, their clients left them; clergymen, their congregation abandoned them; newspaper editors, their offices were closed by the military; workmen, they looked in vain for employment. But while the war limped on to its conclusion, they held grimly to their heresy, and eased their torments from time to time with the news of Bull Run, the delays of McClellan, the complications with England, the draft riots and the other incidents that we now review with shame and sorrow. Unimaginable egotists! I used to see one of them often—an old leader. He had been in jail and in technical peril of his life for a conspiracy for the release of the Confederate prisoners in Camp Douglas. A weak, unbending, handsome old egotist who wore a blue brass buttoned coat and an enormous collar with, not a cravat, but a sash around it. He was still a Douglas Democrat although Douglas had been gathered to his fathers twenty years before. He still had his coat cut in the fashion of the day when it was believed that any sovereign state had a right to pack up and get out; his political principles—but not his shoes—were made by Douglas.

This old man and the other old men whose leader he had been, who garrulously discussed the Missouri Compromise with him, had even then perceptibly begun to

soften toward Lincoln. It was particularly hard for them to change their view, for

**Lincoln's**

**Opponents**

**Softened**

**Toward Him**

Lincoln in life had often troubled them. He used to urge them on to bombastic expositions of the Constitution and then laugh at them. Their political opinions had not changed. People seldom change a wrong opinion if it is unpopular. But they had come to a tolerant, even an unspoken-loving regard for the hated laughter at shallow earnestness—the “kidder” the man on the street would say to-day—who could take nothing seriously—the tricky “country lawyer” who had laid their hero by the heels. The war was wrong, Grant was a butcher and he didn't know much about war or he would've used the navy on the James, if Lee had only had troops and money, if Albert Sidney Johnston hadn't been killed at Shiloh, if Joe Johnston had been supported. Sherman was like a hysterical woman, Stanton was a tyrant, ye can't compare Shuridan with Jubal A. Early, can ye? But Lincoln? “Do ye know, Bill, I sometimes think we was wrong about Lincoln.” “Well, I dunno, maybe we was.”

And this man was their next door neighbor! They had no illusions about him. Old age is indifferent to traditions that conflict with its memories and hatreds. Nothing is more vivid than the clear-eyed hatred of grandfather. If he is in good health his favorite description of one of his contemporaries now asleep beneath all the stony compliments of an epitaph is the good old Saxon word “Scoundrel.” It is not necessary for an old man to be popular. It is not possible for him to be popular. It is not compatible with his period to be even agreeable. He must disagree with the rising generation in order to keep his distinguished place as one soon to be translated.

These old men, believe me, were not affected by the prevailing worship of Lincoln. If they had been contemporaries of Washington or Noah, they would have valorously cursed patriot or patriarch. But in some way the mild and irresistible spirit of Lincoln had slowly erased from their memory old hatreds, old recollections of wrongs done by them to him, old recollections even of neighborly intimacies.

Through the years they saw him at last as he was. Not as they wished him to be, not as their prejudices told them he ought to be, not as he seemed to be to the bloodshot eyes of their youth, but as he was. The good a man does is oft interred with his bones; the good he *is* lives after him.

**W**AS there ever such a triumph for a Human Soul? Did a heart ever continue to beat so long after the body that held it had melted? Did

**The Triumph**

**of a**

**Human Soul**

any other heart—yes, there was one—compel the rhythmic attendance of all true hearts? There was not a political mathematician in the world who couldn't prove to you that as a statesman—awful word—Lincoln was as wild as Dr. Jasper. Contemporary opinion of him was—I don't know how to express it. It makes me want to revisit the tombs of Boston and New York and write things on certain tombstones. I don't suppose there was a man connected in any way with the government at Washington during the war—until near its close—who had much more concern about Lincoln than a balloon has about the atmosphere that supports it. The more tenuous it is the higher and swifter up we go. When it moves, of course we move with it. The really wonderful thing is that a bag of silk inflated temporarily with gas should leave the earth and almost reach the stars, or the clouds or the low clouds. Great achievement!

Everybody bullied, browbeaten, gossiped about Lincoln as everybody does about the weather. Horace Greeley

**Everybody**

**Told Him**

**How to Do It**

harangued him, Joe Medill went down from Chicago to tell him what he ought to do during the Petersburg Campaign. He had to receive delegations of preachers who were determined to instruct him on the conduct of campaigns that made his heart ache like a woman's. They were otherwise womanly moved. They could talk. He was oppressed by Policeman Stanton and snubbed by the sensational Seward. There was generally a very moderate opinion of him. Sumner wrote to his English friends in 1864—a long time after the Gettysburg speech—that Lincoln might not try for re-election; it would be



better if he didn't; while his motives were good he was incompetent. E. L. Godkin wrote—I think—a little while before the assassination and after Lincoln had added the second inaugural address to the Gettysburg oration, comparing him on equal terms with a somewhat notorious mangler of English in Great Britain.

Everybody had access to him. Dana had a recollection about going to his private office after Thompson's arrest and finding the president with his coat off rinsing his hairy arms over a wash bowl. "I have a warrant for the arrest and detention of Thompson which Mr. Stanton wants you to sign," said Dana. "Dana," Mr. Lincoln said, "if you had an elephant by the hind leg and he wanted to get away, what would you do?" "I would let him go," said Dana. "Go back to Stanton and tell him that," said Lincoln. Everybody who wanted to badly enough got to see him. Secretary Hay told that once he was called from an important cabinet meeting and found a man at the door who had some trivial complaint to make. Lincoln, smiling and indulgent as usual, attempted to explain. The little man bristled up. He was not satisfied. "Mr. President," said he, "I think your course is decidedly insincere." The President said nothing but wheeled the little man around, grabbed him by the collar and the seat of the pantaloons, threw him into the hall and returned to resume the other necessary work of the day.

Not all of those who lived in his time disparaged him. I find hundreds of allusions to him in the newspapers and magazines that show men groping for the truth about him. But I am always struck with the inadequacy of

their expressions. I never could understand why Emerson had so little to say about Lincoln during Lincoln's lifetime. (If ever there were two brothers they were Lincoln and Emerson.) When Lincoln was dead they all understood him. Our tears are the lenses through which we see God and his works.

**WHAT** can explain the contemporary indifference to Lincoln and the subsequent worship of his memory except the exceptional, inside goodness and greatness of the man? His apotheosis is without comparison in history. It followed his death by a few years and while

his own generation, the men who knew him as well as thousands know Mr. Bryan and Mr. Roosevelt, were still alive. The belittling power of intimacy ceased to exercise its force the moment he passed away.

At once the world saw him as he was, with all his deep humanity, his love of his fellow man, his sympathy, his sorrow, his tenderness. It became clear even to his enemies and detractors that whatever he did as president was done from a motive of profound affection for his kind. Other men had wrought as great deeds as his but none had wrought in such a spirit.

I am glad to think that the spirit still lives. I would even go so far as to forgive those who advertise in his name. Thereby they prove their knowledge that while the spirit of Lincoln may not direct the practices it does mold the ideals of American life. In due time it may come about that the ideals will have their way and that our public men will try not to seem like Lincoln or look like Lincoln but to be like Lincoln.

